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# Analysis Report

The Polish Party Elections:  
Taming Party Democracy



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## **The Polish Party Elections: Taming Party Democracy**

### **Summary**

From October 1983 through January 1984 the Polish Communist Party held its first nationwide elections since mid-1981, choosing new leaders and committees for all levels below the Politburo and Central Committee. In an impressive show of strength, the leadership maintained firm control over the elections. It succeeded in placing its chosen candidates in all key positions and prevented the kind of widespread attacks on regime policies and on the central leadership that characterized the last election campaign. The elections reflected the erosion of democratic reforms introduced in 1981, when voters had been permitted to select among candidates, central control over local party organizations had been sharply limited, and most incumbents had been thrown out of office.

Despite the indications that regimentation has been reimposed, significant elements of the democratic procedures adopted in 1981 survived in the new elections. Most significantly, in contrast to party elections held during the period of martial law, opposition candidates ran against official nominees for top leadership posts. This occurred in five of the 49 provinces. Although none won, two of the newly elected first secretaries were chosen by bare majorities. All province conferences used secret balloting, and most presented delegates with a choice of candidates in electing party committees. Some lower-level conferences even had spirited contests reminiscent of 1981. Thus, despite the return of considerable leadership control, there still appears to be more rank-and-file participation and pressure for less authoritarian practices in the Polish party than in any other communist party in the Soviet bloc.

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## **The Polish Party Elections: Taming Party Democracy**

### **1981 Democratization**

The elections leading up to the mid-1981 Polish party congress provided a demonstration of democracy unprecedented in a communist party. In the wake of party leader Gierek's fall and the rise of Solidarity, a rebellious mood surged through party ranks, and widespread pressure developed to oust party officials. New election rules introduced in 1981 undermined the discipline imposed by the party's former "democratic centralism" and gave members unprecedented control over the leadership. The rules required the use of secret balloting and allowed nomination of an unlimited number of candidates. New party statutes adopted at the 1981 congress even required that there be a choice of candidates in all party elections.<sup>1</sup>

The 1981 party elections produced a wholesale turnover of top officials. Many intimidated provincial first secretaries did not even bother to run for reelection, and some of those who did were defeated. In contrast to previous practice, the Politburo rarely attempted to recommend candidates for first secretary. In 37 of the 49 provinces there was more than one candidate for first secretary, and in seven cases the participation of three or more candidates resulted in runoff elections. The final voting results were often close: 14 first secretaries were elected by 60 percent or less of the total vote. There was also wide choice for provincial committee positions. Candidates outnumbered available seats by more than 30 percent in 14 of the 18 cases in which the number of candidates was reported.

### **Setbacks to Reform**

Soon after the introduction of martial law in December 1981, the central party leadership began to reassert its control over the regional party organizations. In secret instructions, which were later mentioned in the press, the Politburo authorized local party executive bodies to replace officials without holding the elections prescribed by party rules. These instructions were used to

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<sup>1</sup> These rule changes are discussed in FBIS *Analysis Report* FB 81-10013 dated 8 April 1981, "Democratization of the Polish Party: The New Election Rules."

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remove some of the most liberal provincial first secretaries and to replace them with leaders chosen in Warsaw. Similar actions were also taken at lower levels. These changes encouraged other regional leaders to pay more attention to orders from the central leadership.

By mid-1982 the party leadership felt confident enough to allow provincial party organizations to elect first secretaries by secret ballot to fill vacancies. In contrast to the practice followed in 1981, however, the central party authorities picked the candidates and did not allow any opposition. At provincial plenums a Politburo emissary often proposed the Politburo's candidate, noting that he had been approved by local leaders ahead of time. According to voting results announced in the press, only a handful of committee members voted against these official candidates. Judging by press reports in 1982 and 1983, there apparently were no opposition candidates even in lower level party elections.

### **Preparation for New Elections**

The party leadership's success in controlling local party byelections in 1982 and 1983 established the pattern for its efforts to control the recent nationwide party elections, which the statutes required be held by the end of 1983. As the nationwide elections approached, however, officials appeared to be concerned over how to conduct elections under the new rules and yet prevent a repetition of the unruly process that had occurred in 1981, when attacks on the central leadership and on regime policies were widespread. Some party leaders began suggesting that the time was not yet ripe for the required elections. According to a report in the central party paper *Trybuna Ludu*, some factory first secretaries at a 19 September 1983 conference urged that the elections be postponed. Central Committee Secretary Barcikowski, the party's senior supervisor of organizational affairs, reportedly told them that the resolutions of the 1981 congress "bind us" to holding the elections on schedule.

The party leadership sought to ensure control over the elections by amending the election rules at the 15 October 1983 Central Committee plenum and by issuing Politburo "directives" on how to conduct the elections. These documents were not published, but subsequent press articles indicated that they

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preserved the basic features of the 1981 rules—secret balloting and choice of candidates. The main new restriction apparently was imposed through a reinterpretation of the rule requiring a choice of candidates. A 7 December 1983 *Zycie Partii* article revealed that the requirement for multiple candi-



*Czestochowa Province delegates voting.*  
(Trybuna Robotnicza, 20 December 1983)

dates had been interpreted to mean that party conferences had the right to determine how to choose nominees. Answering a letter protesting that no choice was being allowed in party elections, the article maintained that having only one candidate did not violate party rules. While admitting that article 21 of the party statute explicitly says "the number of candidates must exceed the number elected," *Zycie Partii* argued that the statute also allows a conference to determine the number of candidates and, if it wishes, to present only one candidate for first secretary. Putting forward a second candidate who has no chance of winning, the article explained, would be only a "formality" that would "demean" the election.

## Election Results

The 1983-84 nationwide series of regional party elections demonstrated that the party leadership has succeeded in limiting the 1981 reforms and keeping control of the election process. The Politburo kept tight control over selection of candidates for first secretary, and candidates picked by the Politburo were elected in all 49 province-level conferences. All incumbents were reelected except four who did not run. Judging by press accounts, at most local election conferences the head of the electoral commission announced the official candidate for first secretary after clearing his name with local party officials in preelection caucuses. Then a representative of the Politburo, usually a Central Committee secretary, praised the candidate and announced the Politburo's endorsement.

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*Legnica Province conference. (Gazeta Robotnicza, 26 January 1984)*

Some aspects of the democratic practices adopted in 1981 apparently were followed, however. In five provinces more than one candidate ran for first secretary, and elections for provincial committees and other bodies evidently allowed a choice of candidates. In all 14 instances in which the press reported details of the voting for provincial committees and other party organs, the conferences were presented with more candidates than there were positions to fill. As in 1981, the conferences themselves in almost all cases elected the first secretary, rather than following the previous, less democratic practice of allowing the newly elected committee to elect him. This provided conference delegates with the opportunity to nominate additional candidates from the floor and to cast negative votes.

Some resentment has been expressed in Polish media over this tight control of the selection of first secretaries. In an 11 February Polish radio interview, Central Committee organizational Secretary Mokrzyszczak acknowledged that the Politburo had resorted to making such recommendations in the case of provincial first secretaries and that "some of our comrades did not want such recommendations" because "they believed that it would be more democratic if it were the conference's initiative." According to the 19 March

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*Trybuna Ludu*, participants in a 16-18 March National Conference of Delegates criticized the method of electing first secretaries and questioned whether it was a "healthy situation" when the candidates recommended by the electoral commission always won and no one nominated from the floor was elected.

The most notable indication of continuing resistance to centralized control was provided by the five instances of contested elections for first secretary. That challenges to the Politburo's choice took place at all is significant, and close votes occurred in three of the five cases. The challenges arose in medium-sized provinces not previously known to have led the way in reform, rather than in such well-known reform centers as Gdansk and Krakow, where controls may have been more severe:

- In Gorzow, three opposition candidates were mounted against the Politburo-supported incumbent first secretary. The incumbent finally won in a runoff vote, but only by a 53-percent majority.
- In Plock, the officially sanctioned candidate for first secretary also beat his single challenger with only 53 percent of the vote.
- In Olsztyn, both the official candidate and government policies were challenged in a particularly lively contest. According to a report in the 16 January *Gazeta Olsztynska*, a farm director, nominated from the floor as an opposition candidate, accused the government of treating farmers as "a lower category of citizens" and called for changes in economic and agricultural policy. He garnered 120 of the conference votes to the incumbent's 203.
- In Bialystok and Radom, opposition candidates were beaten by the incumbents, who won with lopsided majorities.

Party leaders apparently did not attempt to prevent choice in electing members of provincial party committees, control commissions, and auditing commissions. Electoral commissions usually nominated a slate of candidates for these bodies equal to the number of seats to be filled, but delegates were permitted to nominate additional candidates from the floor. There were few such nominations, however, in the cases reported. In Czestochowa, for example, 15 nominations for the 97-member provincial committee came from the floor, and in Katowice only four floor nominations were made for the 120-member provincial committee. In all six cases where the exact number of

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candidates for a provincial committee was reported, there were less than 20 percent more candidates than positions to fill, much less than the normal choice in 1981. Only in Gorzow were many candidates nominated from the floor reportedly elected. The electoral commission there nominated only 58 candidates for 79 positions, and at least 21 of the 25 nominated from the floor were elected. Also in Gorzow, two provincial committee secretaries and the chairman of the control commission were defeated in elections for the control and auditing commissions.

Media reporting on party conferences below the provincial level was extremely limited, but there were some accounts of uncontrolled election contests at these levels that were settled by democratic vote. In Krakow, for example, a wide-open contest developed in a party organization when the incumbent first secretary refused to run for reelection. In the ensuing free-for-all, four candidates competed. According to a report in the 14 December *Echo Krakowa*, it took two rounds of voting before one of the candidates received a clear majority. Controversy also developed, according to a report in the 29 November *Gazeta Pomorska*, at a conference of the party organization at a Wloclawek plant. Delegates criticized both the plant first secretary and the executive committee elected in 1981. The first secretary was replaced with his chief rival, who had been voted out in 1981, and according to the newspaper account "very few" of the incumbent plant committee members were reelected.

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